



# Department of Justice

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
Wednesday, March 22, 2006  
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## **LEADER OF IDENTITY THEFT RING PLEADS GUILTY TO CONSPIRACY, BANK FRAUD, AGGRAVATED IDENTITY THEFT**

CINCINNATI - Traci Southerland, age 37, of Cincinnati pled guilty in United States District Court here today to one count each of conspiracy, bank fraud and aggravated identity theft. Southerland admitted that she was the leader of an identity theft ring that stole the personal information of hundreds of individuals in southern Ohio and resulted in \$456,957.77 in loss to individuals, financial institutions and retail businesses.

Gregory G. Lockhart, United States Attorney for the Southern District of Ohio; Gerald A. O'Farrell, Assistant Inspector in Charge, United States Postal Inspection Service; Kurt Douglass, Special Agent in Charge, United States Secret Service, and Chief Chris Wallace, Blue Ash Police Department, announced the plea entered today before Senior United States District Judge S. Arthur Spiegel.

"Southerland admitted that as far back as September 2001, she was the link between other conspirators who were charged with obtaining victims' personal identifiers and those who used the identities to purchase merchandise fraudulently," Lockhart said.

The identity theft ring obtained personal identifying information including addresses and Social Security numbers from sources including the Hamilton County Clerk of Courts website, stolen U.S. Mail and Internet searches. They used the personal information to make counterfeit checks and false driver's licenses in the individuals' names. They bought merchandise by accessing the victim's credit account, opening a new account in the victim's name, or writing a counterfeit check in the victim's name.

Conspiracy carries a maximum punishment of five years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the gross gain to the defendant or loss to the victim. Bank fraud has a maximum punishment of 30 years imprisonment and a fine of up to \$1 million. Aggravated Identity Theft carries a mandatory minimum of two years imprisonment, which must be served consecutive to any other sentence imposed and a fine of up to \$250,000 or twice the gross gain to the defendant or loss to the victim. Judge Spiegel will set a date for sentencing.

Southerland remains on electronic monitoring pending sentencing. Seven others indicted with Southerland are scheduled for trial before Judge Spiegel on April 26.

Lockhart commended the cooperative investigation by inspectors and agents from the U.S. Postal Inspection Service and the Secret Service, as well as Assistant U.S. Attorney Benjamin Dusing who is prosecuting the case.